

SECRET

25X1

5
31

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
National Foreign Assessment Center
12 October 1978

127

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

South Korea: Prospects for Further
Political Liberalization

Key Points

- President Pak Chong-hui, even while committed to maintaining strong centralized rule, seeks to fashion a more relaxed political environment in South Korea.
- Over the past few years, pressures from abroad have been the most direct cause of concessions in the human rights area, but Seoul attaches importance to portraying these actions as responses to internal pressure alone.
- Foreign initiatives have been especially effective when Pak has been both confident about his domestic position and motivated to improve relations with the US.

*This memorandum was prepared by the East Asia-Pacific
Division of the Office of Regional and Political Analysis. Comments
and queries may be addressed to the author,* [redacted]

25X1

25X1

RPM 78-10387

25X1

25X1

SECRET

- In late 1978, Pak will be likely to give serious consideration to a further easing of controls.
- A respectable government showing in the December assembly election could provide the reassurance Pak seeks on the domestic front.
- The prospect of a summit with President Carter would almost certainly impel Seoul to minimize points of friction in relations with the US.
- Real political concessions would have to involve some fundamental change on the implementation of Emergency Measure Nine (EM9), and possibly on the detention of Kim Tae-chung as well.

Liberalization Trends

Two distinct trends in political liberalization have been evident since December 1972, when President Pak introduced his authoritarian "Yushin" constitution.

- The government has made impressive strides in regularizing official procedures.
- Seoul has also adopted a more relaxed attitude toward political dissent.

25X1

25X1

In taking a more relaxed attitude toward political dissent the government also has since November 1976:

- Released, beginning in July 1977, 78 imprisoned political dissidents.
- Ignored a good number of protest meetings and anti-government declarations.
- Continued the trend toward reducing the number of persons arrested for violations of Emergency Measure Nine, as well as the average length of their sentences.
- Improved jail conditions and visiting privileges for political prisoners, including former opposition party leader Kim Tae-chung who has been moved to a hospital.
- Allowed the press increasing latitude in reporting foreign developments, strains in US-ROK relations, and Korean human rights developments.
- Eased pressures on the activist Korean National Council of Churches, even allowing it to sponsor seminars on the human rights question.

Behind the Relaxation

President Pak, like many Koreans of his generation, is philosophically comfortable with and politically committed to strong centralized rule. At the same time, he wants to generate public support for his government by positive rather than negative means, aiming to avoid the creation of a political environment in which control can be maintained only by increasingly repressive measures. Pak is also convinced that Seoul cannot develop stronger grassroots backing unless it eliminates the tradition of

chaos, corruption, and arbitrary arrest inherited from the Rhee regime.

Viewed in terms of this political orientation, the liberalization that has occurred in the past several years has served President Pak well. In fact, on a number of occasions, only Pak's strong personal support has kept these positive developments on track.

Nonetheless, foreign pressures on Seoul and Korea's own heightened sensitivity to its image abroad have generally been the catalysts for the liberalization trends. [REDACTED]

25X1
25X1

[REDACTED] The adoption of a more relaxed attitude toward political dissidence in November 1976 was directly linked to the election of President Carter who, even before taking office, was expected to pursue a vigorous human rights policy.

While a desire to remove irritants in bilateral relations was foremost in Pak's mind, his willingness to loosen controls in late 1976 was tied to a mood of increased confidence in Seoul following several years of relative quiet on the domestic scene. Widespread public acceptance of the style of government that Pak introduced in 1972 underpins the calm. Faced with a continuing threat from North Korea, few Koreans in the South are willing to challenge the government's contention that national security considerations override those of civil liberties. Pride in the economic gains achieved during Pak's 17 years in office outweighs the concern of the general population with the loss of political freedoms [REDACTED]

25X6

Over the past several years, the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP), the press, church, and academic community have been unable and unwilling to seriously

challenge Seoul. They have not abandoned their criticism of the government entirely, however, and in recent months have stepped up attempts to probe the limits of the government's tolerance of dissent. Opponents of Pak view the current period, with National Assembly elections scheduled for early December, as a particularly good time to press their case.

The NDP hopes to enhance its own standing by focusing attention on both recent scandals that have embarrassed Seoul and the government's continued detention of political prisoners. Activists outside the assembly see the pre-election period as their last chance--albeit a slim one--to push for fundamental change in the style of government. They fear that a strong ruling party victory in December, combined with Pak's inauguration for another 6-year term on December 27, will be read as final public approval of the 1972 political changes. In tactical terms, the dissidents hope to force Seoul to choose between the public embarrassment of street protests and the reimposition of strict political controls on the eve of the assembly election.

The resurgence of political activism--particularly a new outbreak of university demonstrations--would in earlier years have brought a quick re-imposition of strict police controls. So far, however, Seoul has apparently decided that dissidence can be kept under reasonable control and that the maintenance of a relatively "liberal" official image is more important than any fallout from popular activism. By way of warning that not all stops are out, the government recently seized several publications (including one issued by the NDP) critical of Seoul. At the same time, however, the government has decided not to bring charges in the case of several anti-Pak demonstrations. Whether Seoul is confident enough to further relax controls before the December election is not clear.

Further Political Concessions

To be meaningful, additional political concessions would have to go beyond a tactical and temporary liberalization to embrace a more fundamental acceptance of dissent.

SECRET

Such concessions would include:

- The lifting of EM 9 which, imposed in May 1975, prohibits criticism of the government. The decree is Seoul's primary means of political control.
- The wholesale release of political prisoners, including former opposition party leader Kim Tae-chung.

The repeal of EM 9 has been under consideration for some time [REDACTED]

25X1

[REDACTED] President Pak's caution may reflect an unwillingness to weaken the government's basic rationale, i.e., that a "state of emergency" exists, for strict controls. In any case, another legal provision, an article of the Criminal Code enacted in March 1975 which has apparently never been applied, would enable Seoul to continue controlling to some degree criticism of the government.

Since July 1977, Seoul has been willing to release imprisoned political dissidents provided that they sign statements renouncing future opposition activities. Despite the fact that not all those pardoned under these conditions have lived up to their promises, the continued detention of Kim Tae-chung stems from his refusal to make this political compromise.

Seoul's refusal to compromise on either the EM 9 issue or Kim Tae-chung release has exacted a considerable price in terms of South Korea's international image--a situation Pak would like to rectify. If new factors are introduced into the Korean political equation, Seoul may welcome the opportunity to break the logjam. As a case in point, the period immediately after the 12 December National Assembly election seems a likely time for further liberalization if it had not taken place soon before.

- The assembly election--assuming, as is likely, a tolerably good turnout and vote for the government--will represent something of a political benchmark

SECRET

SECRET

for President Pak. In contrast to the 1972 vote, which was held in a tense atmosphere only two months after the lifting of martial law, the election is likely to be seen as confirmation of popular willingness to live with the strong, centralized form of rule that Pak has introduced.

- Pak's reinauguration will also secure his political position for the next 6 years, at least as far as the public is concerned. While it is not clear whether the President views the coming term as his last one, it is evident that he considers his reinauguration to be a turning point. For instance, there has been some speculation recently that once reinstalled in office, Pak would consider lifting EM 9 or perhaps reinstating a direct system of presidential election.
- The prospect of a summit meeting with President Carter early in 1979 may well be the greatest incentive for a major political concession. By cultural tradition, the Koreans are strongly motivated to "clean house" before the start of each new year; in both 1976 and 1977 they demonstrated their desire to clear the board of pending problems in bilateral relations. In the last week of 1976, as he anticipated the inauguration of President Carter, Pak ordered the immediate suspension of Korea's nuclear weapons research program--an activity the Koreans knew concerned Washington. In 1977, eleventh hour concessions to the US included the transfer of Kim Tae-chung from jail to hospital, the agreement to return Pak Tong-sun to Washington for interrogation, and a turnabout on the trade liberalization issue.

In contrast to the past two years, which have been clouded by the "Koreagate" and human rights issues, Seoul looks to 1979 as a year when there are likely to be far fewer bilateral problems on the horizon. Likewise the

SECRET

SECRET

chance for a summit meeting with Prime Minister Fukuda anticipated at the end of this year suggests a more positive period in relations with Japan. As such, settling Kim Tae-chung's status, and thus, Seoul hopes, laying to rest the lingering irritants resulting from his abduction in 1973, might be viewed as cementing better bilateral ties with Tokyo.

Handling Concessions

Concessions on EM 9 prisoners, perhaps even on EM 9 itself, would probably be the easiest for the government to handle. Indeed, the groundwork for a compromise may have been laid on 1 October in a committee hearing of the National Assembly. Answering questions, the justice minister noted that the government would soon disclose the names of those persons detained under EM 9. While he added that his ministry has no immediate intention of recommending their release, the publication of such a list--not a normal government procedure--will in itself intensify public pressures for a blanket pardon.

Discussion of the prisoner issue in the parliament may be a prelude to Seoul's use of assembly action to justify a prisoner release. The first release of EM 9 prisoners in July 1977 followed the passage of an assembly resolution, introduced by the NDP, calling for political concessions. With this government-blessed resolution in hand, Seoul was able to portray its action as one responding to internal--rather than foreign--pressures.

If additional political prisoners are pardoned without the necessity of signing a statement of repentance, Seoul may find it easier to deal with Kim Tae-chung. Clearing the jails of all EM 9 prisoners would cover Kim Tae-chung and avoid the need for a special public justification in his case. Nevertheless, Seoul may still want some personal assurances, or at least try to seek to arrange circumstances, that would minimize the potential for Kim

SECRET

~~SECRET~~

to serve again as a rallying point for opposition to Pak. It is not yet clear, for example, whether the government would consider Kim more of a threat if he remained in Korea or went abroad.

Any decision on political liberalization will rest solely with President Pak and will be directly colored by his personal sense of political security. A continuation of current internal and foreign affairs trends would augur well for some major concessions in the "human rights" field. On the other hand, what Seoul and Pak perceive as "political tranquility" has proved a fragile thing in the past. As such, excesses on the part of dissidents at home or surprises on the foreign front--particularly in security relations with the US--could undermine some of the gains already made.

SECRET

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP80T00634A000400010032-7

Next 20 Page(s) In Document Exempt

STAT

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP80T00634A000400010032-7